Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
I shop, therefore I am? Using Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization to rethink consumption and happiness

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
This lesson is designed for a 12th grade humanities course but can be modified to be used in 9-12th history, social studies and English courses.

Duration of Lesson:
5-6 class periods

Content Standards:
Common Core Standards:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Massachusetts Social Studies Standards:
3.28. World History II Learning Standards: Industrial Revolution and Social and Political Change in Europe, 1800-1914: Describe the causes of 19th century European imperialism (the desire for economic gain and resources). (H, E)

3.32. World History II Learning Standards: Asian, African, and Latin American History in the 19th and early 20th centuries: Identify major developments in Indian history in the 19th and early 20th century (the rise of Indian nationalism and the influence and ideas of Gandhi). (H, E)

Lesson Abstract:
This is designed to be a mini-unit that takes Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization and applies it to an examination of the relationship between consumption and happiness in modern day society. This should be done after an initial study of Gandhi and his core beliefs and actions.

Guiding Questions:
• What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?
• Why and how are we “intoxicated” in our society?
• What is the relationship between consumption and happiness?
• What influences our decisions to buy material things?
• What should material consumption look like in our society?
Content Essay

Introduction
When an American journalist asked Gandhi what his secret to life was, he replied, “Renounce and enjoy” (McKibben 1). What did Gandhi renounce and believes others should as well? What is to be enjoyed? How did Gandhi arrive to see this as the secret to life? Through Gandhi’s life experiences as a boy in colonial India during the British raj, a law student in London, as a lawyer in South Africa, and leader of the Indian independence movement, he came to see that the root of the world’s problems could be traced to modern industrial civilization. Gandhi’s worldview saw industrialization as a force that resulted in a need for resources, fostered greed, bred colonialism and imperialism, and stripped humans from leading a life grounded in spiritual and ethical living (Sethia 60). Gandhi’s scathing critique of modern civilization offers us the opportunity to reflect on today’s highly consumerist and materialistic driven culture, and question whether it is providing us with the happiness that is promised to us when we purchase a new car, home or pair of sneakers.

Gandhi’s Critique of Modern Civilization
Through a lifetime of witnessing and personally experiencing the subjugation and exploitation of people across India and South Africa through the instruments of imperialism and colonialism, Gandhi traced the roots of these oppressive systems to industrialization. The advent of the industrial age meant that goods could be made through mass production in factories by machines, and no longer in a home based, hand made economy. Industrialization necessitated an enormous amount of natural resources, driving industrial powers such as Britain, to seek natural resources across the globe, including in places such as India and South Africa. A race between industrial powers began, in which they competed to control as much resources and labor they could. As Tara Sethia explains in her book, Gandhi: Pioneer of Non-violent Social Change, “It is in the pursuit of such material wealth, to satisfy their multiplying wants, that the European nations had colonized most of the world” (Sethia, 59).

The development of a world dominated by industrial driven colonialism and imperialism resulted in the promotion of a life concerned with “bodily welfare” instead of a life directed by spiritual and ethical welfare (Sethia 60). In Gandhi’s seminal work, Hind Swaraj he explains this shift in civilization.

It’s true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life…Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion , now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy…This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion…It seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails to miserably even in doing so…” (Parel 35-36).

Gandhi argued that the increasing value of material wealth, reoriented human’s spiritual and moral compasses from being directed towards spiritual welfare which he viewed as what defines a good and happy life. Gandhi believed that the drive to accumulate material wealth was disconnecting people from their spirituality and creating self-centered individuals who were more concerned with their own material gain, than the welfare of all. Gandhi saw a dire need for humans to free themselves from their selfish desires so they would not obscure them from their ethics and spirituality.
Through the development of modern industrialization in the 18th century, humans came to embrace the worldview that they had the power to control nature. The power to control nature would allow humans to exploit natural resources and accumulate material wealth, which they believed would result in greater happiness. Civilization became defined by this equation, and the byproduct was a world divided into two factions; the industrialized and non-industrialized (Sethia 59). The non-industrialized world became seen as “savage” and “backward,” and the industrialized world believed they had a duty to “civilize” the world’s population, which they did through the systems of imperialism and colonialism throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Sethia 60).

The increase in material wants by humans led to overconsumption and the exploitation not only of resources, but the labor of people. The powerful elite subjected humans to exploitation and enslavement for the sake of profits. Those in power were driven by profits and material gain, rather than spiritual growth and ethical decision making that considered the welfare of humans and nature. Those being oppressed were forced to work in horrific conditions in factory settings, replacing their once dignified labor done by hand (Sethia 60). Gandhi agreed with the British author Edward Carpenter, that modern civilization was a disease, however Gandhi chose to use the metaphor of intoxication as a way to describe what had been inflicted upon humans. He saw that humans became obsessed with their perceived material needs and individual wealth, rather than the spiritual and ethical purposes of life and wellbeing of all (Parel 33).

**True Civilization - Gandhi’s Perspective**

According to Gandhi, true civilization is guided by ethical principals and spiritual qualities grounded in the belief of oneness; that we are all connected, and the welfare of the community is greater than the welfare of the individual (Parel 65). Humans need to strive for mastery over their “minds and passions,” in order to liberate themselves from the toxicity of modern civilization that diminishes their agency and humanness, and traps us in a cycle of perceiving that we need material wealth in order to be happy. Humans should not be controlled by a desire for material wealth, but rather free themselves from these wants, and concern themselves with spiritual and ethical elevation. Gandhi believed that the aim of civilization should be the welfare of all; he called this sarvodaya. Gandhi cites that pre-industrial civilizations believed that true happiness would be found in sarvodaya.

To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors therefore set a limit to our indulgences. They saw happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because he is poor…Observing all this our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures…our forefathers knows that, if we set our heats after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. (Parel 66-67).

In order for true civilization to flourish Gandhi believed in denouncing the wants and perceived needs of material possessions and selfish desires that did not promote spiritual or ethical advancement. “To denounce,” as Gandhi said, is to denounce the idea that wealth and happiness is based on the material world, and the goods themselves by living a simple life, relying on as few material goods as possible. (McKibben 1)
Consumption and Happiness Today: The need for sustainable happiness

Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization one hundred years ago is still applicable today—perhaps even more so apropos as western cultures and those that have been influenced through western cultural imperialism, have come to embrace consumerism and materialism as the root of happiness. In Catherine O’Brien’s work in Sustainability, Happiness and Education, she explains, “…in a consumer society, where consumption and happiness are inextricably linked, individuals confuse the “path to the ‘good life’ as the ‘goods life’” (O’Brien 4). We are obsessed with consumption, so much so that we are willing to watch the globe fall into peril and our lives into debt, because we are told by society that material possessions will make us happy. However, based on what research on happiness is revealing, true happiness cannot be found in a shopping bag, but rather in the relationships we have with family and friends, doing meaningful work, and engaging in the community (O’Brien 4). Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization and his call for it to be aimed at saradoyva; the welfare of all, as well as Catherine O’Brien’s development of the idea of sustainable happiness can guide us in examining our consumption driven and materialistic culture and its empty promise of happiness, as well as help us reimagine how to live a happy life and create a happier world (O’Brien 1).

Gandhi viewed the world one hundred years ago as being plagued by materialism and consumerism. If he was living today to witness our current culture, he would be appalled by the fact that things have progressed, or regressed as he would see it, so that we are now, as Michael Tobias presented in his documentary The Cost of Cool, in training to be consumers from the time we are born through the socialization of media and advertising by businesses and corporations (Tobias). We are constantly bombarded with advertising and experiences in our lives that send the message that the more material goods we own, the more we shop, the more power and status we will have in society, and the happier we will be. We are promised by car companies that if we buy a luxury vehicle it will enhance our sex appeal, attract a partner and therefore increase our happiness. We are promised by shoe companies that if we purchase the same sneakers that (inset name of professional athlete here) wears, that we will be as strong, powerful and capable as they are. We are constantly fed the idea that material things will make us happy. As Gandhi described, we become intoxicated by this idea and stuck in a cycle of trying to buy our happiness (Parel 33). Artist Barbara Kruger satirically captured this in a work she title, “I shop, therefore I am”, a play on Descartes philosophical proposition, “I think, therefore I am.”

Gandhi’s argument that materialism was steering humanity away from the spiritual and ethical purposes of life is all the more significant today as human greed has led to continued exploitation of people and nature and threatens to take our planet to the brink of disaster. Our “intoxication” through consumption is destroying our planet and undermining the very things that have been proven to make us happy. Christopher Falvis, Worldwatch President underscores this; “The drive to acquire and consumer now dominates many people’s psyches, filling the space one occupied by religion, family and community” (O’Brien 4). Catherine O’Brien who has coined the term sustainable happiness, explains that researchers have proven that these are some of the core factors that have proven to lead to true happiness, not possession of material goods (O’Brien 4).

How do we create a world in which we don’t let material consumption control our lives, destroy our world, and fill us with a false sense of happiness? In addition to Gandhi’s call for us to practice swaraj; freedom from our selfish desires and dependency on material goods, Catherine O’Brien’s call for sustainable happiness will allow us to pursue genuine wealth and help contribute to creating a sustainable world. Catherine O’Brien defines sustainable wealth as,
“Happiness that contributes to individual, community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations” (O’Brien 1). O’Brien’s concept of sustainable happiness is a pragmatic approach to conscientious living that asks us to think critically about the multitude of daily decisions we make and how they impact our own lives and those of others. In living with an intention of sustainable happiness, we can strive to practice Gandhi’s secret to happiness, by denouncing material wealth and enjoying a simple life and things that bring genuine wealth; family, friends, community and meaningful work.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities:

Part 1: Gandhi’s Critique of Modern Civilization (2 days)
1. Introduction to key concepts and essential questions. Students could be introduced using a gallery walk of images related to key terms and guiding questions and/or a word web brainstorm of the key terms (see below).

2. Close reading and discussion of Modern Civilization in Hind Swaraj.

Guiding Questions:

- What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?
- Why and how are we “intoxicated” in our society?
- What is the relationship between consumption and happiness?
- What influences our decisions to buy material things?
- What should material consumption look like in our society?

Key Terms:
civilization, industrialization, labor, consumption, materialism, happiness
Part 2: Gandhi’s Vision of a True Civilization (1 day)
1. Close reading and discussion of True Civilization in Hind Swaraj.
2. Close reading of content essay if necessary to help students solidify understanding.
3. Assessment and Bridge Activity: What would Gandhi say about our culture of consumption today? Students draft a letter or op-ed they imagine Gandhi would publish in today’s newspaper critiquing our modern civilization.

Part 3: Consumption and Happiness (3 days)
1. Small Group Discussions: Consumption and Happiness- What’s the connection?
2. PowerPoint presentation on Advertising and Happiness
3. Students find advertisements that promise “happiness” and present to class
5. Close reading of Catherine O’Brien’s Sustainable Happiness and discussion
6. Interdependence Chart for a product students love
7. Assessment: Students write a consumption manifesto; explaining when and where they will shop, what they will buy and why.

Materials Needed:

- Gallery walk of images related to guiding questions and key terms.
- Selections “Civilization” and “True Civilization from Hind Swaraj by Gandhi.
- Content Essay
- Reading on Sustainable Happiness by Catherine O’Brien
- Powerpoint with examples of advertisements
- Interdependence chart example
- A consumption self assessment
- Resources available on www.sustainablehappiness.ca